



**MH**

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U.S. climber Nathaniel Coleman can reach the stop-clock atop the speed-climbing wall in less than seven seconds.

## NEED FOR VERTICAL SPEED

*Climbing will make its Olympic debut this summer, complete with a version of the sport that requires speed and oozes adrenaline—but lacks one thing climbers love.*

BY JOHN BURGMAN

**YOU MAY** have been rock climbing before, but you've never done it the way Nathaniel Coleman is doing it right now at the Momentum Indoor Climbing gym in Salt Lake City. Coleman isn't climbing so much as Spider-Manning his way up a 15-meter wall, all instinct and quick reflexes, just a few feet from the top in under six seconds. That's where he coils his legs and leaps (yes, really), smacking the buzzer before falling backward to swing from his safety harness.

Electric, right? Except Coleman, one of the United States' finest competitive climbers, can't stand it. "Speed |||→



**▶ DON'T LOOK DOWN!** If you want to climb any wall quickly, says Coleman, learn the route so well you never have to look at your feet. "Looking up and down will slow your time," he says.

climbing is something I don't like," the 23-year-old says. "But sometimes you've got to do stuff that you don't like." Especially if that something can get you to Tokyo.

Top climbers worldwide are learning to embrace the same attitude. Competitive climbing makes its Olympic debut this summer in Tokyo, with a format that combines three different disciplines into a single event. There are no medals for individual disciplines, though; athletes must compete in all three to have a shot at the combined climbing medal. Two of the disciplines are well-known. Lead climbing is what you're most familiar with: You're in a harness attached to a lead rope, attempting to scale a high wall filled with

a challenging blend of holds. Then there's bouldering, which involves climbing without ropes or a harness on a shorter wall, with blends of holds called "problems."

The wild card for nearly everyone will be the third discipline, speed climbing, which is basically a vertical track meet. Two climbers line up in separate lanes, *American Gladiator*-style, then race 15 meters upward on a 5 percent inverted-grade wall, trying to reach the stop-clock at the top first. Some athletes love the playground-style face-off. "It's the most natural thing you can think of: Who gets to the top of the wall the fastest?" says six-time U. S. national speed-climbing medalist John Brosler, 22.

Technically, all three disciplines have you racing the clock. In the first two, you're trying to climb as high as you can (lead climbing) or solve as many "problems" in the fewest moves (bouldering) before time expires. But depending on whom you ask, speed climbing's emphasis on, well, speed (over tactics) is either a spectator-friendly evolution of climbing—or a bastardization of the sport.

Blame Russia. In the 1940s, the Soviet Union prioritized speed in climbing competitions, and eventually the event joined the climbing World Cup circuit. In 2007, the International Federation of Sport Climbing (IFSC) established a standard for the speed-climbing course. The sport has grown in popularity since. It's now contested in the U. S., too.

Around the globe, many competitive climbers, like Coleman, aren't hyped to race up walls on autopilot. Lead climbing and bouldering are arguably more popular with climbers because the routes always change, and they more closely mimic the feel of an outdoor climb. But speed climbing also "lacks the critical problem-solving element that makes rock climbing so special," says Coleman. The best male speed climbers finish in less than seven seconds, and when the Olympic format was announced in 2016, Coleman's performance in competition was nowhere near that. It wasn't until he placed 31st in the speed portion of the combined format at the 2018 IFSC World Championships that he started focusing on speed. It takes "hundreds" of runs up the speed wall—memorizing footholds and handholds—before you get a feel for the wall, Coleman says.

While most climbing emphasizes grip strength, speed climbing pushes you to develop leg strength. Brosler, a vert-racing specialist who just missed the overall Olympic cut, likens the training to soccer drills, which focus on footwork and athleticism. He regularly does 100-meter sprints and barbell squats. "Your legs are where all the power comes from," Brosler says. "At the elite level, your arms just kind of steer you on your way up, and your legs are like the motor providing all the power and momentum."

In November, Coleman became the only U.S. male competitor to qualify for Tokyo, in part because he'd grown comfortable on the speed-climbing wall. Still

tall and lean, he's added the power and dexterity necessary to scale the course in 6.728 seconds, 1.25 seconds off the world record. "I realized—I think everybody realized—that speed climbing is going to be this different beast," says Coleman.

That beast builds more than Olympic climbing ability. Speed climbing hones lower-body explosiveness, which can serve anyone well on the basketball court and in everyday life. Here's how you can train for the speed wall.



Ben Mounsey-Wood (Illustration)

## LICENSE TO SKILL!

*Scaling the speed wall (or, uh, any wall!) takes total-body strength. Build it with these four moves (okay, three moves and one kids' game) from Coleman and Brosler.*

### BUILD YOUR BACK WIDE-GRIP PULLUP

Every climb is a series of miniature pullups. So do pullups with an extra-wide grip, building lat strength. Do 3 sets of 8 to 10 reps.

### CRUSH YOUR CORE TOES-TO-BAR

Core strength is essential when you climb. Dead-hang from a pullup bar, arms straight, core and shoulder blades tight. Keeping your core tight, swing your legs up to touch the bar (and yes, it's okay to swing a bit). Do 3 sets of 10 reps.

### BUILD YOUR WHEELS GOBLET SQUAT

Leg power is key to any speed climb, so Brosler recommends the classic squat. Hold a kettlebell or dumbbell at your chest to add resistance and also build core strength. Do 3 sets of 10 to 12 reps.

### EDUCATE YOUR FEET (REALLY!) HACKY SACK

"You have to use some fast-twitch and slow-twitch muscles," says Coleman. So grab a hacky sack and try to keep it going for three 30-second intervals. "It increases foot-eye coordination, which is becoming more and more important in competitive climbing."

## WALL RISE!

**Are you in love with speed climbing's light-speed pace? Great, says Coleman, but you should try all three variations of climbing. "Pursue what you are inspired by," he says. "But it would be a damn shame to miss out on the other two disciplines."**



### LEAD CLIMBING:

You'll learn fundamentals here, hooked into a harness, climbing 40 feet off the ground on unpredictable walls. "Lead climbing teaches you how to climb efficiently and calmly," says Coleman.



### BOULDERING:

You're 10 to 20 feet off the ground, not attached to a rope, a forearm endurance test that makes you stronger on lead walls. "Boulderers are in the best position to transition to speed climbing," Coleman says.



### SPEED CLIMBING:

You're in a pure sprint that prizes power. The downside: fewer mental challenges, according to Coleman. "Speed climbers have no hope of transitioning to the other two disciplines."